

## NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

---

ISSUE 10.2 (SUMMER 2014)

Special Issue:

Gender and Journalism: Women and/in the News in the Nineteenth Century

Guest Edited by F. Elizabeth Gray and Nikki Hessel

### **The Making of Professional Authors**

[\*The Formation of the Victorian Literary Profession\*](#). Richard Salmon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 279 pp.

Reviewed by [Linda Peterson](#), Yale University

<1>Richard Salmon's study of the emergence of the professional author focuses on the period 1820 to 1850 and the search for a "collective identity of the literary profession" (210). If the eighteenth century featured the Grub Street hack and the Romantic period the man of genius, the early Victorians sought "collective embodiment and group recognition" (1); they imagined "institutionalized structures of professional recognition" to counter the "disorganic Literary Class" (210) that Thomas Carlyle identified in "The Hero as Man of Letters" as the problem of authorship in an age of *laissez faire*. In a sense, Salmon's book reinforces broad trends identified in other recent studies of nineteenth-century authorship: a shift from Romantic genius to a Victorian work ethic, from the exceptional individual to what G. H. Lewes called a "Macedonian phalanx" and William Thackeray, more humorously, a fraternal "Corporation of the Goosequill" (quoted on 210). In an original vein, though, Salmon explores these trends by considering new iconographic and narrative modes that emerged in the 1820s and influenced representations of authors and authorship well into the 1850s.

<2>In the iconographic mode, Salmon (re)discovers collective biographies of living authors published in this period. Whereas prior biographical dictionaries had canonized the illustrious dead, new collections featured the "present race of Authors and their works" (1) — to quote John Watkins and Frederic Shobal, editors of *A Biographical Dictionary of the Living Authors of Great Britain* (1816). So, too, newly launched periodicals featured articles on current authors — as in William Hazlitt's series "Living Authors" in *The London Magazine* (1820-21). Not all of these visual and verbal portraits heroicize the author. As Salmon observes, "if the format ... [is] iconographic, ... the tone of individual sketches is often iconoclastic" (2). The "Gallery of Illustrious Literary Characters," written (mostly) by William Maginn and illustrated by Daniel Maclise for *Fraser's Magazine* (1830-38), includes highly iconoclastic columns about living writers who were anything but "illustrious." Some figures, Salmon notes, were "selected on the grounds of their supposed lack of lasting cultural significance, giving it some resemblance to a latter-day

Dunciad” (3). This “iconographic” section, presented in the “Introduction,” is well worth reading for its original materials and sharp observations about authorial representations in the early Victorian period.

<3>The “narrative” section — which heavily influences the three main chapters on Carlyle, Thackeray, and Dickens — seems more familiar in its emphasis on the *Bildungsroman*. Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, published in 1794 and translated by Carlyle in 1824, plays a pivotal role. Drawing on the observations of Wilhelm Dilthey and later scholars such as Susanne Howe, Rosemary Ashton, and G. B. Tennyson, Salmon argues that the “literary *Bildungsroman* (or novel of apprenticeship) performs the composite ideological function of reproducing the *image formation* of the professional author by mobilizing the iconic figures of literary portraiture within the narrative framework of developmental subjectivity” (33). More pointedly, the *Bildungsroman* requires authors to explore the tension between what Hegel called “the poetry of the heart and the opposing prose of circumstances” (34), the noble ambitions of authorship versus the financial practicalities of a competitive, volatile publishing market. In *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34) Carlyle transforms Goethe’s conception of self-development by emphasizing “practical Bildung” (34) and the necessity of work. In *Pendennis* (1848-50) Thackeray, ever conscious of the grubby aspects of earning a living, parodies *Wilhelm Meister* and its legacy in a “radical disenchantment of the model of Romantic professionalism proposed by Carlyle” (35). By contrast, in *David Copperfield* (1849-50) Dickens “steer[s] a median course between the social degradation of manual labour, at one extreme, and the moral dubiety of professional ideology, at the other” (118), thus contributing positively to “The Dignity of Literature” debate and re-enchanting the figure of the author.

<4>While the central chapters of *The Formation of the Victorian Literary Profession* focus on these familiar key figures, I appreciated Salmon’s serious engagement with other novels that debate the terms of contemporary authorship: Benjamin Disraeli’s *Contarini Fleming* (1832), Edward Bulwer’s *Ernest Maltravers* (1837), G. H. Lewes’s *Ranthorpe* (1842), James Grant’s *Joseph Jenkins; or, Leaves from the Life of a Literary Man* (1843), Thomas Miller’s *Godfrey Malvern; or The Life of an Author* (1843), and Robert Brough’s *Marston Lynch* (1860). These lesser-known *Bildungsroman* give a rich sense of how Victorians negotiated — or failed to negotiate — the conflicting intellectual, social, and financial demands placed upon them. The case of Laman Blanchard, a real-life rather than fictional author, indicates what Thackeray considered the reality of “the aspiring apprentice writer whose ‘ideal standards of excellence, to be reached but by time and leisure’ were frustrated by the constraints of material circumstances” (87). In Blanchard’s short career, Goethe’s ideal of *bildung* confronts marketplace realities, a confrontation that many Victorian authors faced in practice and explored in fiction.

<5>What role, in Salmon’s view, does gender play in the formation of the Victorian literary profession? I think it is fair to say that gender is present but not prominent in his book. Salmon acknowledges — and scrupulously cites — critics who have approached the careers of male authors in terms of gender. He cites, for instance, James Eli Adams’s *Dandies and Desert Saints* in his discussion of Carlyle’s desire for a manly career and Kingsley’s *Alton Locke* (1850) in the chapter “Broken Idols” on working-class authors. He quotes Mary Poovey’s *Uneven Developments* in his analysis of David Copperfield’s “disciplined mental labour” (111), labor both openly acknowledged and, in Poovey’s words, seemingly “effortless” and “explicitly effaced” (111). Most significantly, he devotes a chapter, “Moving Statues,” to

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) "within the generic context of the early Victorian *Bildungsroman* established in previous chapters" (175). This includes an illuminating discussion of the function of statues that allow Barrett Browning to revise the woman writer's "arrested development" — as embodied, for example, in Laetitia Landon's "A History of the Lyre," where the poetess is ultimately "frozen into an artistic posture" (201).

<6>Nonetheless, Salmon's research suggests that women writers were not crucial to the formation of a "collective identity of the literary profession" (210). All their important *Bildungsromane* and autobiographies appear *after* 1850, the point at which he believes professional formation "was essentially complete" (217). In a quiet parenthesis, following his discussion of the male *Bildungsroman* listed above, he notes: "to my knowledge, there are no comparable accounts by female novelists of the early Victorian period, which is presumably related to the greater difficulty faced by women in entering a profession known for its strong masculine homosocial culture" (77). Thus, for all their canonical importance today, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1855), Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, and Harriet Martineau's *Autobiography* (composed 1855, published 1877) don't really count in the *formation* of professional identity.

<7>A different historical account might be constructed, I think, in which women authors become crucial in professional formation, if Salmon had considered narrative and iconographic materials that he mentions but doesn't fully explore. Textually, the key novel for women's "*image formation* ... within the narrative framework of developmental subjectivity" (33) was Madame de Staël's *Corinne* (1807), not Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*; this French text, with its Anglo-Italian heroine-artist, influenced early Victorian women from Landon to Barrett Browning and formulated the tension between self-cultivation and practical necessity differently from Goethe's. Visually — and herein lies crucial evidence — women writers appear in the collective biographies that Salmon features as "*iconographic* modes of representation that emerged during the early decades of the nineteenth century" (16). For example, just as *Fraser's Magazine* published a group illustration of the male "Fraserians" (1835), an image reproduced on the dust jacket of his book, it also published a group image of eight women writers, "Regina's Maids of Honour" (1836), seated around a tea table and conversing about literary matters. Although these two images may suggest a gender divide between the (female) domestic amateur and the (male) literary professional, might not they also offer evidence of a desire to construct collective identity broadly and acknowledge the crucial role that domesticity played in the making of a reputable Victorian author?

<8>Even more interesting are the portraits of women writers that Henry F. Chorley included in *The Authors of England: A Series of Medallion Portraits of Modern Literary Characters* (1838). This and other collective biographies that Salmon references tell a different story about women writers and the formation of the Victorian literary profession. Of the fourteen authors featured, all in a visually homogenous "commemorative style" (3), four are women (Felicia Hemans, the Countess of Blessington, Sidney Morgan, and Mary Russell Mitford). Hemans leads the entire group, coming before the arguably more famous Walter Scott and George Gordon, Lord Byron. Chorley's emphasis in the textual accounts partially explains why he places Hemans first and why he has chosen the other women: he is interested less in local celebrity than in international reputation and professional work ethic as markers of

professional status. Hemans “claims a place of honour among the modern Authors of England” because of the “popularity which attended her poems in her own country and in America” and because of an “earnest and generous devotion to her art.”<sup>(1)</sup> Similarly, Chorley notes the continental reputation of the Countess of Blessington, characterizing her memoirs as “our version of the French Sévigné, Du Deffonds, De Staëls” (34). Lady Morgan’s biography praises the singular originality of her work and observes that she has won “an European reputation ... by her own unassisted hand” (51). Mary Russell Mitford, an author harder to sell in terms of international reputation, given the regionalism of *Our Village* (1824-32), becomes significant as an author whose recent royal pension demonstrates the newly recognized status of the author. The portraits of these women writers suggest that, in the view of their contemporaries, they contributed significantly to the formation, repertoire, and status of the Victorian literary profession (their lack of *Bildungsromane* notwithstanding) and that a fuller history of that profession might result from attending to their real and iconographic presence.

#### Endnotes

(1) Henry F. Chorley, *The Authors of England: A Series of Medallion Portraits of Modern Literary Characters, Engraved from the Works of British Artists* (London: Samuel Tilt, 1838), p. 1.<sup>(^)</sup>